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## Transitioning from Military to Civilian Life: Examining the Final Step in a Military Career

by Dave Blackburn

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### Introduction

All Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members are eventually released from the Forces. Some request a voluntary release as new career opportunities open up to them. Others are released when their physical or mental health are such that they no longer meet the universality of service principle.<sup>1</sup> That principle includes “the requirement to be physically fit, employable and deployable for general operational duties.”<sup>2</sup> There are also CAF members who are released because their time is up: they have reached the mandatory retirement age or completed the required period of service. In the worst-case scenario, CAF members are pushed into retirement as a result of their misconduct or unsatisfactory service. Thus, there are a number of reasons that may lead to a CAF member being released.<sup>3</sup>

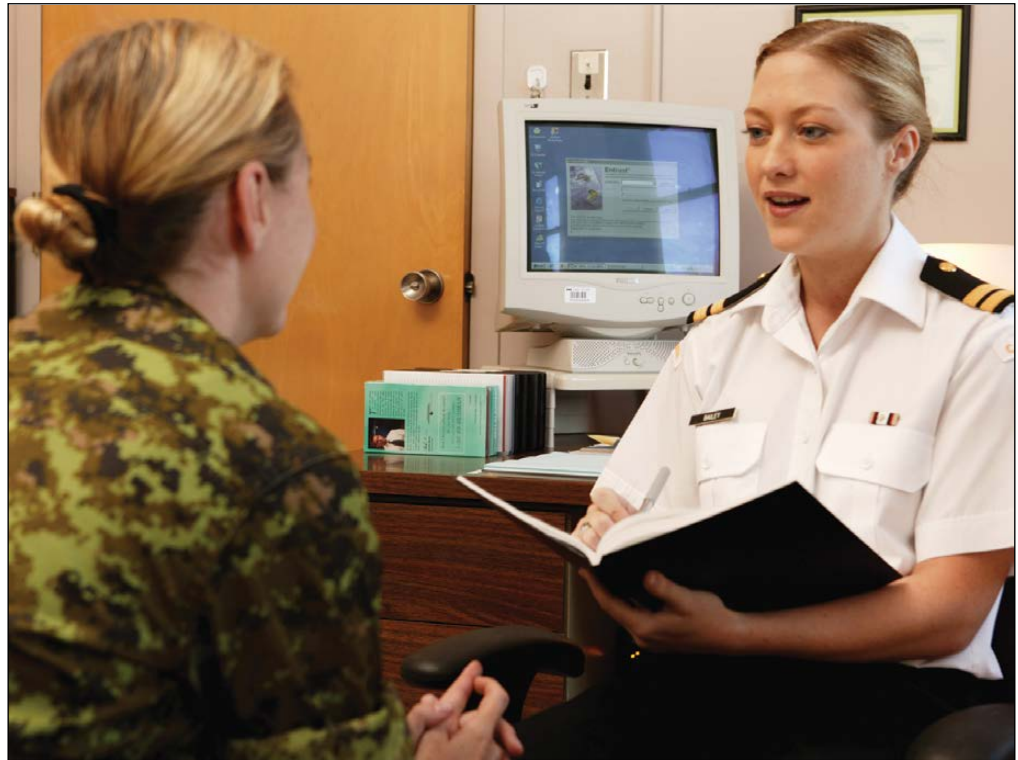
For career CAF members, the process of being released from the armed forces that they belong to and identify with and transitioning to civilian life can be particularly stressful and complicated. The process affects many facets of life and impacts people on the personal, social, family, financial, and administrative levels, which can be positive or negative for the member.<sup>4 5 6 7 8 9</sup> As renowned leaders in the field of military social work J.E. Coll and E.L. Weiss note, “transition from military life to civilian life can be a daunting task, and for many people it’s a confusing time.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, for some members, transition is difficult, while for others it goes smoothly and is relatively problem-free. The release and transition experience is different for each person.<sup>11</sup>

Although Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) finds that the majority of releases seem to go well, there are still a number of widely recognized difficulties and challenges. One VAC study states that “two-thirds (62%) of CF Regular Force Veterans who were released from service during the years 1998–2007 reported an easy adjustment to civilian life, and a quarter (25%) of the STCL [Survey on Transition to Civil Life] population reported a difficult adjustment to civilian life.”<sup>12</sup> That last statistic is very revealing: one out of every four CAF members will have trouble transitioning from military to civilian life. The difficulties can be caused by a variety of factors, take on different forms and vary in intensity, and there may be multiple solutions. Still, the fact remains that, as members become veterans, some

will suffer the consequences of this difficult transition and may face serious psychosocial problems such as homelessness, alcohol and drug addiction, poverty, unemployment, suicide, criminality, incarceration, or mental illness.<sup>13 14 15</sup>

The psychosocial problems outlined above result from an unsuccessful transition, and involve a social maladjustment to the realities of returning to civilian life. Recently, a study was conducted to identify the number of homeless people in Montreal. Of the 3,016 people counted, 6% were veterans (181 people).<sup>16</sup> That figure is similar to the ones obtained in 2013 in Toronto (7%) and 2014 in Ottawa (nearly 140 people).<sup>17</sup> In January 2016, Employment and Social Development Canada identified at least 2,250 homeless veterans in Canada.<sup>18 19</sup> Those proportions are higher than that of veterans within the general Canadian population, which is around 2%. Given these numbers, there is reason to believe that investing in preparing military personnel to transition to civilian life will enable them to do so with less difficulty.

This article takes an in-depth look at the period leading up to a member's release from the CAF. That period is a pivotal time in a member's transition that can span anywhere from several days (in the case of a voluntary release) to several years (in the case of a release for health reasons). Because the length of this period varies greatly, it is nearly impossible to develop a general transition program that would include all types of releases. As a result, the CAF must consider all releases individually. The intention of this article is to present thoughts and discussion on the last step of a person's military career and to provide a military-civilian transition process model.



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### A Military Career

It is important to recognize that each person's military career trajectory is unique. A number of factors influence the course of a career, including the person's choice of occupation, their performance at each qualification phase, their opportunities to advance in their chosen field, their openness to postings and deployments, their family situation, their relationship with the chain of command, their individual readiness, their physical and mental health, and the length of their career. It is therefore difficult to chart the course of a career and its progression in a way that would be specific to a group of CAF members or a given occupation. Still, it is possible to chart what might be considered a "typical" military career, from the time a member is recruited, to the time that he or she retires, assuming that the career will last 25 years.<sup>20</sup> Figure 1 was created by the Department of National

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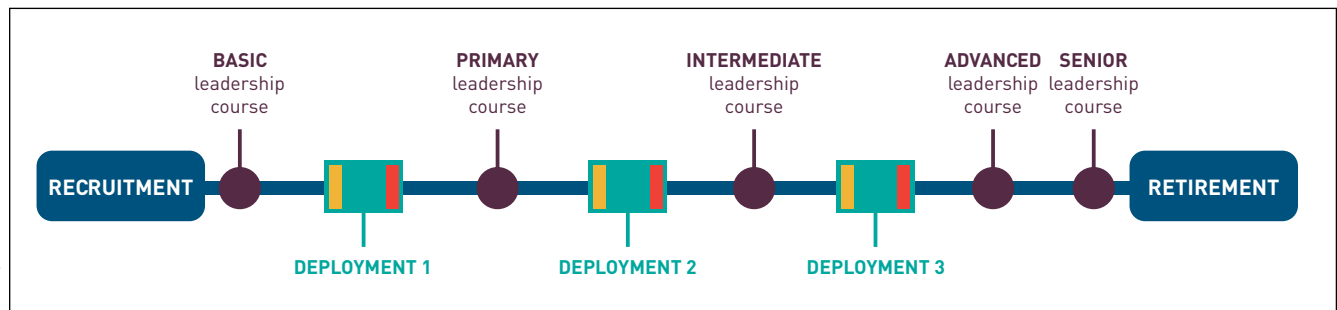


Figure 1 – Typical trajectory of a military career

Department of National Defence, 2013

Defence<sup>21</sup> and shows the typical trajectory of a military career. What Figure 1 *does not* show is the disproportionate relationship between what the Department of National Defence and the CAF spend on candidates at the time of recruitment versus the time of retirement and release. Civilians must go through many steps when newly recruited, including a 12-to-15-week stay at the Canadian Forces Leadership and Recruit School. However, at the time of their release, after members may have given 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 or even 35 years of their lives to the organization, they may only be entitled to a few hours of guidance. That imbalance is hard to explain, given that adaptation challenges appear to be more complicated when a member is returning to civilian life and support resources are lacking. Another major factor that should justify a considerable investment is that, at the time when members are released, their physical and mental health is generally not as good as they were at enrolment, and numerous deployments have eroded their social support networks.<sup>22</sup> Logically, one would expect members leaving the CAF to receive special attention, as “leaving the military ‘family’ is not an easy process for many serving men and women ....”<sup>23</sup>

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go through the different steps of Basic Military Qualification or Basic Military Officer Qualification.

Why does the transition from civilian to military life require such a long period of adjustment, ranging from 12 to 15 weeks at minimum? Here is one of the possible explanations: there is no other career or organization in Canada that requires such a complete and deep adherence to a totally new way of life, which is ruled by regulations, orders, specific values, a hierarchy, and a regimental system.<sup>24</sup> “When you join the military, you go through a cultural indoctrination to become a soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman. You are in a military community. You are looked after. It is unique.”<sup>25</sup>

From the Department of National Defence’s point of view, military candidates must undergo a period of indoctrination: “Candidates will have restricted free time for the first four weekends, with training scheduled on Saturdays and Sundays. This period helps to develop basic skills, facilitates the integration to the military life, and develops team spirit among the members.”<sup>26</sup> This rite of passage therefore presupposes an indoctrination in the sense set out by Quebec professor and author Dr. Francis Dupuis-Déri: [trans] “[Indoctrination] is distinguished by its voluntary nature and its political orientation: the aim is to encourage, through speech and/or formative practice, respect, and even enthusiasm, for the official authority or ideology that the one who indoctrinates intends to serve.”<sup>27</sup> Among the specific values of military organizations are the following: “subordination of the self to the group, obedience, acceptance of sacrifice, commonality of effort, and self-discipline.”<sup>28</sup>

From this perspective, the CAF wants to train its military leaders and, in order for that to happen, the candidates must adhere to a particular lifestyle, embody values that are specific to the military system and take part in ongoing training and professional development. Figure 2<sup>29</sup> shows the five leadership elements (expertise, cognitive capacities, social capacities, change capacities and professional ideology) based on the member’s level of leadership.

**Recruitment or Enrolment**

A person’s military career begins at the time of recruitment or enrolment. After carrying out the administrative enrolment procedures at a CAF recruiting centre, candidates are sent to the Canadian Forces Leadership and Recruit School for 12 weeks (for non-commissioned officers) or 15 weeks (for officers). That stop at Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, marks the true start of a military career, and is the beginning of the first qualification phase. Once candidates have gone through “door 154” or, in military jargon, the “green office,” they quickly begin to understand exactly what they have gotten themselves into. In the weeks to come, candidates must

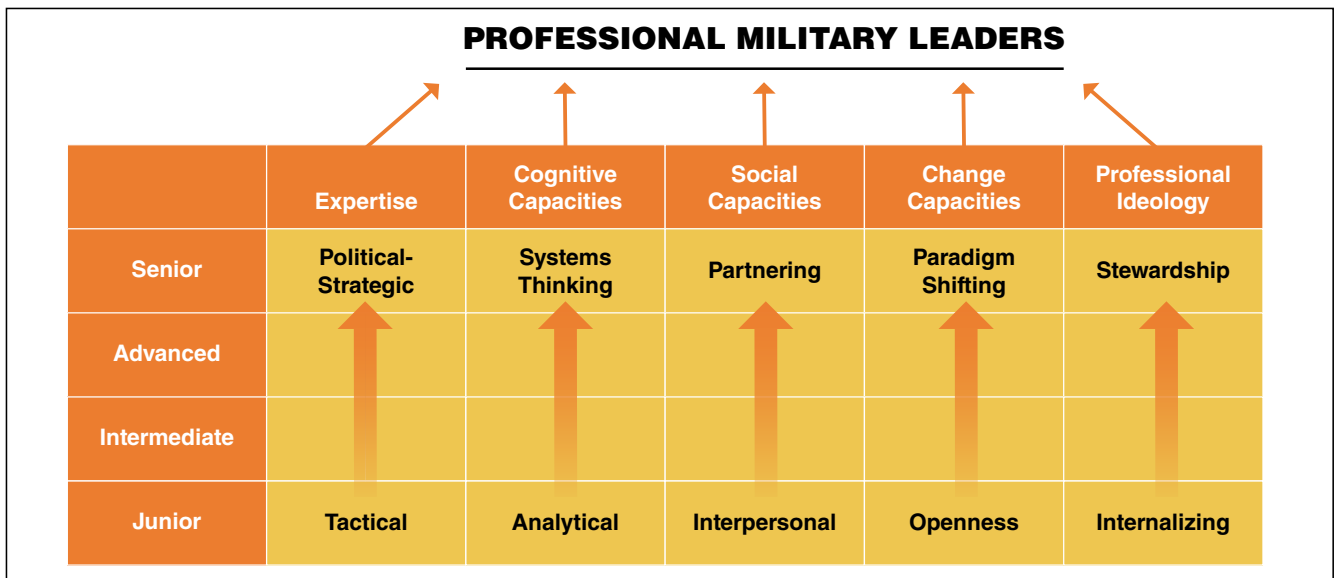


Figure 2 – Leader Professional Development Framework

Department of National Defence, 2016



Transitioning from civilian to military life involves adapting to a whole range of specific and unique components. The adaptation is gradual but is not necessarily a cause of ongoing psychosocial imbalance for a civilian who has freely made the choice to join the military.

## Retirement and Release

A military career eventually ends with a member's retirement or release. On a practical level, that final step is essentially administrative, but it impacts a number of facets of a person's life. Members must undertake a series of steps regarding their pension benefits, the return of their equipment, and their final move. They may also participate, if they wish, in a seminar to prepare for a second career. An optional transition interview with a Veterans Affairs Canada case manager may also take place; that meeting is for passing along information concerning the programs offered to veterans and, in particular, disability benefits. Then, before the official departure, a member's career may be celebrated with a Depart-with-Dignity luncheon, at which the member will receive cards and certificates, and speeches will be given highlighting his or her accomplishments.

In such cases, there is no period of indoctrination to civilian life. For members who have spent a number of years within a very organized, regimented, relatively inflexible system that has occupied most of their professional their lives, the absence or loss of support from this structure can be destabilizing.<sup>30</sup> In fact, losing what the University of Ottawa's Karine Regimbald and Jean-Martin Deslauriers refer to as the "symbiotic" relationship between members and the CAF institution [trans] "which requires its members to forget or lose themselves, that forces them to take part in exercises that lead to resocialization, and that imposes a system of values on them"<sup>31</sup> is a source of contradiction and has no equivalent in civilian life. "Transitioning military personnel must now fend for themselves and their families, and some feel a sense of abandonment and alienation."<sup>32</sup> There are many transitional challenges, including returning to the civilian job market or an academic institution, physical and mental health problems, access to provincial health and social services, psychosocial difficulties, insufficient or no social support, the jumble of emotions that people experience, and family issues.<sup>33 34</sup>

Although the results of all the studies consulted indicate that most CAF members will navigate the transition successfully, Paul Davies, a Research Associate at Lancaster University, admits that those results are questionable.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, "it is arguable that data on transitions is open to interpretation since transition can occur at different levels, for example, occupational and emotional, and what could be perceived as a successful transition at one level might disguise the fact that transition at another level has gone less well."<sup>36</sup>

For some members who have not taken the time to prepare a retirement action plan that fosters a sense of belonging in the community (place to live and reside), a life purpose, interpersonal

relationships, recreational activities, occupational projects (work or school) and access to health services,<sup>37</sup> adapting can be brutal and lead to psychosocial imbalance. Some authors maintain that the transition from military to civilian life is a serious long-term planning exercise that should begin at least 12 months before the person's release.<sup>38</sup>

## Recruiting and Retirement: Two Different Adaptation Processes

A CAF career requires constant adaptation on the part of members and their families, from recruitment to retirement, in many situations. These include basic training, the various phases of occupational training, leadership courses, training exercises, pre-deployment training exercises, deployments, deployment homecomings, and postings in Canada and overseas, to name just a few. This process of constant adaptation affects the psychological, social, cultural, professional and family spheres of a person's life. The stress the member experiences in various situations is a reaction to having to adapt to the constraints of the environment. The adaptation reaction, which psychologists Richard L. Lazarus and Susan Folkman refer to as "coping," represents the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person."<sup>39</sup> It is therefore not incorrect to say that recruiting as much as retirement is a [trans] "process that

involves the constant interaction between the individual and the dynamic world in which he or she evolves and interacts."<sup>40</sup> They are two adaptive processes that force people to face stressors from sources that are specific to each process. How individuals subjectively view a process is key, as what is stressful for one person is not necessarily stressful for another.<sup>41</sup>

There is a huge body of research on adapting and coping. Theories around role transitions are very relevant to the transitions from civilian to military and from military to civilian life. The transition that members

must go through when they are released from the CAF is first and foremost a professional one. These theories [trans] "make intelligible, during these transitions, the processes at work in the subject-environment exchanges, that is to say, to explain ways of adapting to new professional roles and the reciprocal adjustments of the subject and his or her work environment."<sup>42</sup>

## The Military-Civilian Transition in Four Phases

There is no consensus within the scientific and military community on the operational definition of the military-civilian transition process. Nor is there any unanimously accepted conceptual model. Scientific research has made it possible to advance the concept of the transitional approach, but without arriving at an explanatory model. The scientific community agrees that the military-civilian transition process is complex, personal and multi-faceted.<sup>43</sup> The transition can have an impact on a person's psychosocial balance, quality of life, well-being and health.

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Some U.S. studies have highlighted the importance of certain factors in the transition process. We feel that it is necessary to conduct an interpretive reading of the results and place them in a Canadian context. Among other things, it appears that having completed college or university and being an officer facilitates the transition process<sup>44</sup> but that having had traumatic experiences, having been seriously injured, having served in a combat zone and having known a military member who has been injured or killed makes the transition process more challenging.<sup>45</sup>

Loyola University's Lisa Burkhart's and Nancy Hogan's study of 20 female veterans of the U.S. military leads to a better understanding of this transition in women.<sup>46</sup> The study highlights seven specific categories of adaptive measures used by service-women. The study is interesting, but its scope is limited.

Between 2014 and 2016, we conducted a qualitative study<sup>47</sup> of 17 French-speaking veterans living in Quebec. Some of the main findings were that the transition process generates negative feelings among the majority of participants, particularly those who were released for medical reasons; the type of release (voluntary/end of service or health reasons) has an impact on the transition; personal preparation plays a very important role in the process; and creating and maintaining a social network before the transition period is an element that positively affects the experience.<sup>48</sup> On the last point, it seems that CAF members who retain a strong social bond with civilians have an easier time going through their transition.

Of all the scientific articles consulted, the University of Southern California's Carl Andrew Castro's and Sara Kintzle's most clearly conceptualizes the transition process in what they call the "military transition theory."<sup>49</sup> The authors postulate that the military-civilian transition process has three phases that interact and overlap. Each of the phases brings into play individual, interpersonal, community and organizational factors that influence the transition.<sup>50</sup> The authors refer to the first phase as "approaching

military transition," in which personal, cultural and transitional factors create the foundation for the transition trajectory.<sup>51</sup> They refer to the second phase as "managing the transition"; it involves the individual, community, organizational and transitional factors that impact the individual's transition from military to civilian life.<sup>52</sup> The third phase, "assessing the transition," covers the outcome of the transition (from the veteran's perspective).<sup>53</sup>

The theory proposed by Castro and Kintzle focuses upon American soldiers' transition from military to civilian life. From our point of view, although it adds to the reflection on this last stage of the military career and attempts to conceptualize a little-studied and poorly documented phenomenon, their theory is incomplete and only moderately applicable to the situation of CAF members.

We are therefore suggesting a Canadian model called the *military-civilian transition process model*. Our model has four consecutive, interconnected phases. The entire transition process from military to civilian life is based on shared responsibilities between several parties. Obviously, the CAF members and their families play a vital role and share a part of the responsibility at each phase. The Department of National Defence plays a very active role in the pre-release and release phases. Veterans Affairs Canada plays a central role during the release phase. Provincial and municipal governments and community and social organizations, regardless of whether they are specifically for veterans, play a crucial role during the post-release phase.

Each phase of the *military-civilian transition process model* includes social, personal, family, health-related, financial, academic, professional, and psychological factors. It is the sum of those factors that will determine whether or not the CAF member is able to adapt to his or her new civilian life. That adjustment or maladjustment will be subjectively perceived by the member in transition through indicators such as quality of life, well-being, social integration and health. Figure 3 is a graphic representation of the model.

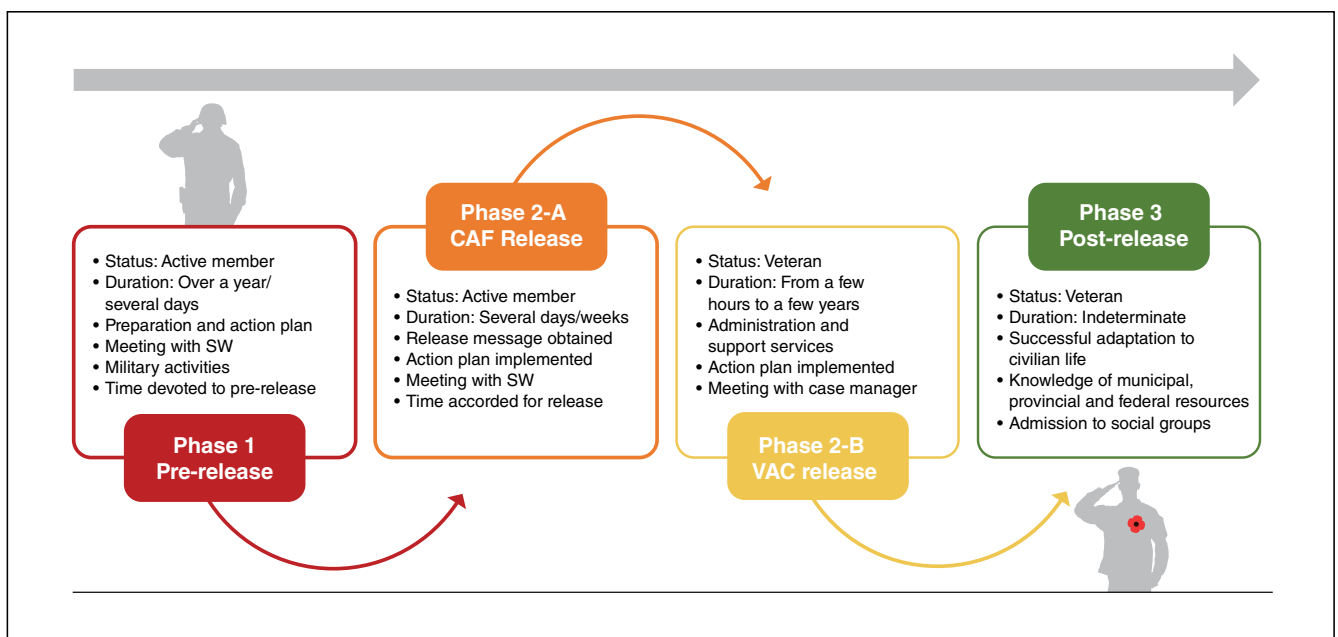


Figure 3 – Military-civilian transition process model (M-C TP)

Below are the detailed characteristics of each phase.

<b>Phase 1 – Pre-release</b>	
<b>Status</b>	<b>Active member</b>
Start of the phase	Phase starts with the desire to request voluntary release, as mandatory retirement age approaches, when there are indicators of conduct that is inconsistent with military service, or when the person has been assigned a permanent medical category.
End of the phase	When the release message is received.
Duration	It varies. Obtaining a release may take over a year, but sometimes it takes only a few days.
Things to consider	The type of release must be considered, as should the state of the member's health and his/her level of education, military occupation, marital status, choice of living environment and occupational project.
Measures to take	A transition action plan must be prepared.
Use of time	Members complete their normal job tasks, their condition permitting, but they should be given time to prepare for their release.
CAF support	Individual meetings between the member and a social work officer/social worker to prepare for the release. Meeting between the member, his/her family and a social work officer/social worker.
<b>Phase 2-A – CAF release</b>	
<b>Status</b>	<b>Serving member</b>
Start of the phase	Phase starts when the release message is received.
End of the phase	Phase ends on the last day of active service (including take-back holiday).
Duration	It varies from several days to several weeks.
Things to take into account	Obtaining the release message. This phase is essentially administrative and includes departure procedures, pension benefits, final move, return of military equipment, and the departure meal. Medical services continue until the member's health has stabilized.
Measures to take	Transition action plan should be set in motion.
Use of time	The member should be given most of his/her time to prepare for the release.
CAF/VAC support	Individual follow-up meetings between the member and a social work officer/social worker to ensure that the release goes smoothly. Meeting with a CAF and VAC case manager.
<b>Phase 2-B – VAC release</b>	
<b>Status</b>	<b>Veteran and civilian-to-be</b>
Start of the phase	Phase starts when the release message is received.
End of the phase	It varies.
Duration	From several hours to several years.
Things to consider	Phase during which the veteran negotiates with VAC for service delivery. Phase is focused on administration, services and health care. The type of release and transition issues should also be considered.
Measures to take	Transition action plan should be set in motion. Member should join veterans' groups.
Use of time	The veteran decides how to use his/her time.
VAC support	Meetings with a VAC case manager. Programs and services in place if the veteran has access to them.
<b>Phase 3 – Post-release</b>	
<b>Status</b>	<b>Veteran and full-fledged civilian</b>
Start of the phase	Phase starts when the veteran subjectively feels that he/she has adapted to civilian life.
End of the phase	Indeterminate.
Duration	It varies. Each veteran will reach this phase at his/her own pace, based on a number of factors.
Things to consider	The following things should be considered: type of release, social integration, a sense of belonging in the community, interpersonal relationships, social and sports activities, and the person's occupational plan and health.
Measures to take	The veteran should try to maintain a healthy level of social and community engagement. The veteran should join social and/or veterans' groups.
Use of time	The veteran decides how to use his/her time.
Support	Access to provincial health and social services. Social and community programs. Veterans' initiatives.

## CAF Pre-Release and Release

*“The CAF and DND have primary responsibility for providing transition programs and services to still-serving CAF members, and everything should be done to help releasing CAF members, particularly ill and injured ones, make a successful transition to civilian society.”<sup>54</sup>*

During Phase 1, the pre-release phase, there is a shared responsibility between the member, his/her family, the CAF, and the Department of National Defence. Members who begin this phase may have decided to ask for a voluntary release, or know that they will soon be released because they are reaching the mandatory retirement age, or for health reasons because they have been assigned a permanent medical category. The concept of time may appear abstract, but it is a good idea for the member to begin thinking about his/her release as soon as possible. That reflection should focus upon social, personal, family, physical and mental health, financial, academic, and professional aspects. The professional aspect is of particular importance because, according to one study, most veterans (89%) work after their release.<sup>55</sup> The member should develop a realistic, structured action plan.

The CAF can play a leading role during the pre-release phase. Who better than social work officers and social workers to help members and their families prepare for the pre-release phase, and, ultimately, for their transition to civilian life? “Social work is a profession concerned with helping individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their individual and collective well-being. It aims to help people develop their skills and their ability to use their own resources and those of the community to resolve problems,”<sup>56</sup> or to prevent those problems. A number of challenges related to the transition are psychological, and social workers, using a systemic approach, are able to consider the various difficulties and address them with the member.<sup>57</sup>

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Currently, CAF social workers and social work officers play absolutely no role in the transition process from military to civilian life. In our opinion, this is a major gap to fill, especially considering that they have the mandate of supporting and encouraging “all CF members to take an active part in maintaining their personal health,” and creating and supporting “a climate that fosters positive mental health and by striving to reduce the factors that put mental health at risk.”<sup>58</sup>



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A minimum of three meetings should be mandatory during the CAF's pre-release and release phases. The first meeting should take place between the social worker and the member, alone, when the release is imminent. The first meeting should build the foundations of an action plan, including short-, medium- and long-term objectives, as well as the means to achieve them. The second meeting should take place a few weeks later between the social worker, the member and the family. It should be aimed at educating the family about the likely challenges of the transition. The third meeting should take place in the member's final days of service to validate his/her status and transition plan implementation, and provide referrals to external organizations if needed.

In short, [trans] "military social workers play a key role within the Canadian Armed Forces; as experts, they are consulted on the well-being of the troops."<sup>59</sup> They should therefore be there to support member well-being until the moment members hang up their uniforms.

### Conclusion

There is an acute need for military authorities to address the pre-release and release phases because they have many impacts upon the unique and subjective coping mechanisms of each member who is released from the CAF, and upon whether members successfully transition from military to civilian life or develop psychosocial problems. Those early stages are crucial in the transition process, and the full responsibility rests with the Department of National Defence, the CAF, the members, and their families. A member who is well-oriented and well-equipped should be able to navigate the adjustment process with less difficulty than a person who can only count on himself/herself, and whose preparation is limited. The CAF has all of the necessary resources within its workforce to introduce preparatory initiatives to help with the transition. It would only require a bit of determination and recognition of the urgency to act.





## NOTES

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